

Amiri Baraka from Black Arts Movement to Anti-Americanism

Lamia Mahmoud Nabil Helmy Frere

Abstract:

The present study is an attempt to trace Amiri Baraka's contribution to the African-American arts. It is that type of biographical researches which gather the main data about an influential figure for the sake of creating an account of the most significant events and contributions to a specific field. Baraka was born in 1934 and died in 2014 and spent his life defending on the identity of the African-American people and arts. The importance of the present study lies in how important was Baraka's works and deeds. His ideologies and the way they ranged from Christianity to Islam, and from Marxism to Anti-Americanism can also be viewed as an important point of research. Tracing Baraka's life, the present study reveals that although there were different turning points that completely changed his beliefs, the main stable attitude throughout his whole life was his attack against the US Administration and his advocacy to the African American people.

Key words: Amiri Baraka – Black Arts – Anti-Americanism – Dutchman – The Slave – African-American plays

أميري بركة من حركة الفنون السوداء إلى معاداة أمريكا الباحثة/ ليا محمد نبيل حلمي فريز

ملخص البحث

الدراسة الحالية هي محاولة لتتبع مساهمة أميري بركة في الفنون الأفريقية الأمريكية. هذا النوع من أبحاث السيرة الذاتية هو الذي يجمع البيانات الرئيسية عن شخصية مؤثرة من أجل إنشاء سرد لأهم الأحداث والمساهمات في مجال معين. ولد بركة عام ١٩٣٤ وتوفي عام ٢٠١٤ وقضى حياته في الدفاع عن هوية وفنون الأمريكيين من أصول أفريقية. وتكمن أهمية الدراسة الحالية في مدى أهمية أعمال وإسهامات أميري بركة. كما يمكن أيضًا اعتبار أيديولوجياته والطريقة التي تراوحت بها من المسيحية إلى الإسلام، ومن الماركسية إلى مناهضة أمريكا ومعاداة الإدارة الأمريكية نقطة مهمة للبحث. بتتبع حياة بركة، تكشف الدراسة الحالية أنه على الرغم من وجود نقاط تحول مختلفة غيرت معتقداته تمامًا، فإن الموقف الثابت الرئيسي طوال حياته كان هجومه على الإدارة الأمريكية ومناصرته للشعب الأمريكي من أصول أفريقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

أميري بركة- مسرحية الهولندي- مسرحية العبد-المسرحيات الأمريكية الأفريقية- حركة الفنون السوداء- معاداة أمريكا.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 LeRoi Jones: Early Life

Upon his birth, Baraka was given the name Everett Leroy Jones. He was born in 1934, in Newark, New Jersey. His father moved from South Carolina to Newark in 1928 where he worked as a supervisor in the post office. He also became a member of the National Association of Postal Employees (NAPE). It may be worth mentioning here that his father had to leave South Carolina after he could not obtain his own birth certificate and work in the post office there. This was simply because all birth certificates of the Black were not recorded before 1916. The father seemed to start a struggle for the civil rights before even giving birth to his child who became later highly influential in this field. (“Amiri Baraka”, n.d.)

Baraka’s mother Anna Lois Jones joined the social work and contributed as a consultant to the Board of Education. She also used to do volunteer effort for the Department of Human Services. Baraka was so proud of them. In his eulogy of his father, Baraka describes his mother and his father respectively as follows:

“She was my social consciousness, he was my earthly guide, how I planted my two feet on the ground. If my mother nurtured my forming vision, it was my father

who causally insisted that it only had value in the real world.” (The Blacklisted Journalist, 2002)

As a child, Baraka’s first interest was on Jazz. This kind of music can be said to have a great impact on his life and career. He worked in a music warehouse and later wrote about jazz criticism. As he was very proud of his African parents, he also fell in love with what he called ‘*the African magic chants*’. (Ulaby, 2014) In his early childhood, he was creative enough to start writing science fiction and do some cartoon arts.

1.2 LeRoi Jones: Academic studies and work

His academic studies ranged from a scholarship to Rutgers University, then Howard University where he was gifted enough to graduate two years early. In his undergraduate years, he got some lectures in religious and philosophical studies that were highly influential on his later writings. It was also during his undergraduate years when Baraka changed his name to be Leroi (which seems more African) since he felt disappointed when the school community tried to encourage black students to act like the white ones. Such a community seemed to drive the black members to feel ashamed of their origin and start to get rid of it. Another disappointment occurred when he joined the American Air Force and became at the rank of a sergeant. He discovered that black people were never welcomed; they were even hated there.

Definitely, his experience added to the impact on his writing. Baraka described his military experience as "*racist, degrading, and intellectually paralyzing*". (Gates Jr, 2014)

Leroi Johns worked in a library in Puerto Rico where he was able to read lots of poems by the Beats. He started to write poetry when he came back to America. He also worked in a warehouse of music where he improved his jazz interest and got closer to black poets. In 1958, he married Hettie and gave birth to his two daughters: Kellie and Lisa (later in 1962, he had another daughter from di Prima called Dominique di Prima). Baraka and Hettie founded a literary magazine and started a lot of publications for black poets and for Leroi Jones himself. This paved the way for the evolving of the American Theater for Poets in 1961. Till this time, Baraka was known only as a poet attacking racism in the American society.

2. The dramatic turning points

During the 1960s Baraka experienced a dramatic turning point in the way he tackles racial discrimination against the blacks. He was fully convinced that the American society does not provide any kind of liberty for the black. Thus, the Negro poetry and literature was given no opportunity in such a racial society. His first poems appeared in 1961; *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, followed by his article "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature'" in

1962. Then in 1963 he wrote about black music and how it was developed to jazz in his book *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. (Amiri Baraka, n.d.) His masterpiece was *Dutchman* in 1964, and after Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965 Baraka responded with a poem titled "A Poem for Black Hearts". He started to encourage the blacks to fight for their rights against the American society that was proved to be assigned only for the White. He then changed his name from Leroi Jones to Amiri Baraka and changed to Islam after he divorced his wife Hettie and left his daughters. He wrote in an essay titled *Confessions of a Former Anti-Semite*, and was published in the *Village Voice* that:

"As a Black man married to a white woman, I began to feel estranged from her ... How could someone be married to the enemy?"

He got married to his second wife Sylvia Robinson in 1967. She changed her name to Amina Baraka later. In Harlem, he established Black Arts Repertory Theater following the Black Arts Movement. At that time, the call for violence as a need dominated the black art and literature. He published his poem "Black People" in 1967 after he was arrested for carrying a weapon illegally.

Another turning point occurred in Baraka's life and doctrine. He turned to be a Marxist in the 1970s. However, his revolutionary attitude against the White American society was still the same. Baraka wrote describing that change as follows:

“I [still] see art as a weapon and a weapon of revolution, It’s just now that I define revolution in Marxist terms.”

Among his powerful works was “Somebody Blew up America,” a poem in 2001 after the September 11 attack. He made a shocking suggestion that Israel must have known of the attacks before it happened. It was not his first time to attack Israel as he used to describe Zionism as a form of racism. For him, “*Anti-Semitism is as ugly an idea and as deadly as white racism and Zionism* “. (Hansen, 2002). Baraka also wrote *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* in 1984, and won the American Book Award in 1989. He was given the name Poet Laureate of New Jersey in 2002 and in the same year was listed among 100 Greatest African Americans by Molefi Kete Asante. Then he died in 2014 after suffering from diabetes and a serious surgery. (Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), n.d.)

3. Black Arts Movement (BAM)

The Black Arts Movement (BAM) was an art movement established in the middle 1960s and lasted till the middle 1970s. BAM’s main purpose was to support the black artists resisting the influences of the American culture. It was the cultural aspect of the Black Power, or as what Lary Neal calls “aesthetic and spiritual sister of Black Power” (Neal, 1968)

It was highly influential that it did not involve only literature but music and visual arts as well. Many black playwrights, poets, musicians and artists joined this movement in order to express and foster their black identity. Baraka is considered to be the founder of BAM as he established the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School in Harlem in 1965. BAM members were politically motivated in the sense that they manipulated their art to reflect their black ideology. It can be called a movement of literary nationalism. Krasner describes it as “a cultural nationalist movement that has waged an anti-colonial struggle in the United States and the Caribbean since 1965” (Krasner, 2006).

After the assassination of Malcolm X, the cultural nationalists claimed for creating a variety of black arts to be introduced to the blacks attempting to seek their liberty. (Foster, 2014). Baraka and other Black Nationalist artists were more like social activists who rebelled against racial ideologies such as colonialism and neocolonialism. For Baraka, “the theatre must be an institution for bringing challenge” and “Black theatre must be a school for teaching high morality, for inspiring black people to move, for Self-Determination, Self-Respect and Self- Defense” (Sabah Atallah, 2009) BAM inspired other black movements such as The Black Scholar established by Robert Chrisman and Nathan Hare in 1969.

4. Turning to Islam

Inspired by Malcolm X and his beliefs, LeRoi Jones found that Islam embodied the African American appeal to ethics. In 1968, in the wake of the assassination of Malcolm X, LeRoi Jones changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka and turned to become a Muslim. He was highly influenced by the ideology of Maulana Karenga who was known as a nationalist leader. It was a turning point in his life and art (Brenner, 1993). Baraka found his identity in the utopian image and the call for equality in Islam. A number of Black Art Movement members turned to Islam during this period among other African American people who escaped American slavery and found a shelter in Islamic beliefs. Baraka's play *A Black Mass* shows the influence of Islam and nationalism on his literary works. The play is based on the Islamic myth of Jacoub, the Black scientist, or more precisely, magician who applies eugenics to create a new White creature.

However, his failed experiments ended up with a new White monster that whenever approaching anyone, it turned him/her to be a dreadful monster like it. The number of White monsters increased and the city turned to become a battleground between White monsters chasing Black kind people (Islam's Influence on the Black Arts Movement, 2019). According to Nation Of Islam (NOI) it is the myth of a black scientist or magician who lived in Mecca where black people did not feel satisfied. So, Jacoub used

his science to create new creatures of white origins. Although there are many debates regarding Jacob's myth in NOI, Baraka based his play on it and weaved the plot in such a way to present his doctrine of Black Nationalism. In his opinion, the confrontation between White Americans embodied in his play as the White monsters and the languid Black Americans has become inevitable. Maintaining the African American identity is then the responsibility of every African American fellow. Their passive attitude would never bring any kind of compromise or peace.

5. Baraka and Marxism

In 1974, Baraka experienced another radical shift in his life and ideology when he turned from Islam and Nationalism to be a Marxist. His philosophical beliefs seemed to be completely converted into socialism, and his anti-capitalism attitude became extremely violent (Smith, 1987: 235). At this time, Baraka believed that no peaceful compromise would be possible in the light of such an increasingly capitalized society. Now the confrontation was no more between the Black and the White Americans. It went further to be a fierce struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat American classes. Capitalism turned the poor Americans whose majority was African Americans to become disenfranchised in their country. Accordingly, Baraka started to advocate for the 'proletarian nation' of the Black (Lee, 2011: 384). As the

proletariat could never achieve their liberty through any democratic means, they had to fight oppression and slavery more fiercely (Lee, 2011: 147). To put it another way, it was then time to “arm yourself or harm yourself” (Lee, 148). This was the justification for Baraka’s dramatic reverse from nationalism to Marxism. Baraka himself expressed his abandonment of nationalism in the *New York Times* as follows:

"It is a narrow nationalism that says the white man is the enemy . . . Nationalism, so called, when it says ‘all non-blacks are our enemies,' is sickness or criminality, in fact, a form of fascism."

He wrote Marxist poetry such as *Hard Facts*, *Poetry for the Advanced*, and *What Was the Relationship of the Lone Ranger and the Means of Production?* In addition to some essays compiled in a book titled *Daggers and Javelins*. All his Marxist literary works aimed to uproot capitalism from the American society. Baraka states that his intentions have never changed whether he is nationalist or socialist. In both cases, he is revolutionary in different terms:

"I think fundamentally my intentions are similar to those I had when I was a Nationalist. That might seem contradictory, but they were similar in the sense I see art as a weapon, and a weapon of revolution. It’s just now that I define revolution in Marxist

terms. Once defined revolution in Nationalist terms. But I came to my Marxist view as a result of having struggled as a Nationalist and found certain dead ends theoretically and ideologically, as far as Nationalism was concerned and had to reach out for a communist ideology."

However, his Marxist literary works were not as successfully received on the level of the audience or the critics as his nationalist works during the 1960s (Baraka & Harris, 1991).

6. Dutchman and The Slave

Baraka's *Dutchman*; produced in 1964, is considered his masterpiece. The play embodies his revolutionary ideology regarding the inevitable confrontation between the Black and the White Americans during the 1960s when Baraka used to be a nationalist. It is the story of Clay, the Black American young man boarding a subway coach on his way to a party at a friend's house. When the train stops at a station, Clay is looking out of the window to see the face of a beautiful White woman aged about thirty standing on the platform. He starts staring at her and they exchange smiles before she goes into the compartment and deliberately seats herself next to him. Lula is the symbol of the White American society in the full sense of underestimating the other, and African Americans in particular. Her conversation with Clay ranges from

flirtation and a declared sexual seduction to a true insult and contempt. For Lula, Clay is a stereotypical African American young man who is boasting his White American style of clothing, ignoring or perhaps feeling ashamed of his African origins. She can easily tell his past events and predict his future ones. He is not sure and gets confused how she knows a lot about him:

"Hey, you still haven't told me how you know so much about me."

She forces him to accept that she accompanies him to the party. She starts seducing him but he rejects her. So, she turns to insulting him and his origins:

"Boy, those narrow-shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by....What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and a stupid tie? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard."

For Lula, and hence for all the White Americans, Clay the Black Negro is offered an apple but he ate too much of it. When, finally, the Black American revolts to the White society; when Clay is no more passive and slaps Lula and forces her to her seat, she did not hesitate to kill him at the end. It is a powerful message to all the helpless Black. Baraka summarizes his philosophical idea that if the Black do not revolt and even uproot the White American, the latter ones will never hesitate to do so. The story

describes in brief the Black origins having been corrupted by the civil White society. It also symbolizes the racial discrimination and the racial oppression falling on the Black Americans as well as their inevitable violence and revolt (Sabah Atallah, 2009:15).

Baraka's *The Slave*, written and produced in 1964 in the same book with *Dutchman*, exemplifies the confrontation between the Black and the White characters. The struggle in *Dutchman* continues in a much fiercer approach in *The Slave*. Baraka presents the story as if predicting a violent civil war to be taken place in the future between the poor Black Americans and the oppressive White ones. He depicts how the Black would overcome and win victory over such a racist society (Goher, 2016: 41). Walker Vessels, the main revolutionary Black character, introduces the play in a Prologue while singing some blues. He is the ex-husband of the White American woman, Grace who is now married to a white professor called Easley. Walker and Grace have got two daughters who live with their mother and her husband. Walker assumes that he comes round to take his daughters to live with him. The confrontation between Walker, on the one hand, and Grace and Easley, on the other, ends up with Walker killing both of them. It is the future of the struggle on the American land as predicted by Baraka. However, the approach is depicted more revolutionary than in *Dutchman*. The Black should fight for their rights and be no more victims. This is the message that Baraka wants to deliver. A

kind of transformation occurs in the Black attitude. The sounds of explosions throughout the play refer to a dramatic end of the struggle. Walker stands alone at the end crying that the children died. He turns back to be that 'old field-slave' as appeared on the stage at the beginning of the play.

In the context of *The Slave*, the allusion that Walker is the true killer of his daughters becomes acceptable even if it is not directly mentioned in the play. Baraka prepared for this incident so deliberately and cleverly that the readers are not shocked by it or even they can predict it (Goher, 2016:139). Walker tells Grace during their confrontation that he prefers his daughters die to live in a society despising the Black and leading them to hate themselves and their Black father. However, the contradiction, created by the rise of a child's cry after Walker declares that the children died, leads the readers to more confusion. From another perspective, such a cry can be viewed as a symbol of protest by children all over the world. It is another confrontation between children's innocence and the racism and hatred of the society.

7. Anti-Americanism

A question may arise regarding the reason for choosing the Arabic translations of African American plays to form the implementation of the present study. However, a kind of parallel relationship can be drawn between the African American struggle

within the US White society on the American land on the one hand and the Arab Israeli struggle in the Middle East and the US attitude towards it on the other hand. Another justification, however contradictory its generating impulses, is the fact that Arab youth aspire for the American dream or the American society as promising of more democracy and liberty. The focus in the present study on the suffering of the African Americans within the American society, of which they are native members, is considered a call for abandoning such a false dream. The following few lines outline what is known as Anti-Americanism in the Arab countries and the distorted American dream.

The hatred of the US administration and their foreign policy particularly in the Middle East is defined worldwide as Anti-Americanism. The concept is exaggerated to cover the antagonism of the American people as well. It is not then some sort of criticism of the US interferences in the internal affairs of other countries. The term does not merely refer to any politically-based attitude. (“Anti-Americanism”, n.d.) Such hatred and fear have turned to be actions on the ground and have been peaked in September 11 attacks that are described by O’Conner and Griffiths as “quintessential anti- American acts which satisfy all of the competing definitions of Anti-Americanism” (O’Connor and Griffiths, 2006:21).

Although Anti-Americanism is quite noticeable worldwide, only its sources in the Middle East and Islamic countries are outlined for the purpose of the present study. The US administration has been responsible for committing four dramatic deeds over time that can justify for such a profound hatred in the region. First, the invasion of the Iraq land and overthrowing their regime in 2003 was not welcomed on the level of either governments or the peoples in the region. The continuous war was quite sufficient to fuel anti-American attitude. However, that antagonism can be dated back before even such invasion. The second US deed is the so-called war on terror which was highly opposed by the majority of Muslim and Arab peoples. They have become fully convinced that The USA calls for unjustified war claiming that it is a fight against terrorism whereas it is definitely invasion. Thirdly, the US unilateral actions have been viewed as driving unfavorable attitudes all over the world on the level of the governments and the public opinion. Arab and Muslim peoples, in particular, perceive American as doing against their public interests. The fourth and foremost reason is the Arab-Israeli conflict. The unfair attitude of the American administration towards the crushed Palestinians has fueled anti-Americanism more than any other act. The American image has become distorted due to the belief that the US administration is always in favor of Israeli crimes. This drives not only the feeling of hatred

but also a kind of support or at least inclination to suicide bombings against America (Rosentiel, 2005).

However, the relationship between Arab youth and America fluctuates between admiration and loathing. It is described by the Jordanian political analyst Mustafa Harmaneh as ‘a love-hate relationship’. It can be noticed that many Arab young people aspire for America as the land of liberty and welfare. From a cultural perspective, American music, food, education, language, and even fashion style are all popular among Arab and Muslim youth. Quite surprisingly, they are the same guys who fire American flags everywhere and keep blaming the US administration for their betrayal of the American dream of democracy, liberty, equality and human rights (Arab World Love-Hate for the US, 2006)

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